

General background of the age of reason

with reference to dominant spirit of the age

1-General background :

The age of reason was a period in the 17th century in which intellectual expression and open interchange of ideas was encouraged by philosophers. The age of reason is called the investigation of true and fabulous theology. During this period, there was a pamphlet by Paine which attacked Orthodox by Christianity. Paine, who was a deist, mythology and had value of piece of literature, but was not divinely inspired. Paine argued against what orthodox Christians call 'special revelation'. Throughout the age of reason Paine bases his analysis of the Bible and Christianity on new testament Paine writes that, although the book claims to be based on revelations, this is impossible because by definition, a revelation must come directly from God to the people without an intermediary like the Bible.

2-Dominant spirit of the age of reason

After the Restoration in 1660, when Charles II came to the throne, there was a complete repudiation of the Puritan ideals and way of living. In English literature the period from 1660 to 1700 is called the period of Restoration, because monarchy was restored in England, and Charles II, the son of Charles I who had been defeated and beheaded, came back to England from his exile in France and became the King.

It is called the Age of Dryden, because Dryden was the dominating and most representative literary figure of the Age. As the Puritans who were previously controlling the country, and were supervising her literary and moral and social standards, were finally defeated, a reaction was launched against whatever they held sacred. All restraints and discipline were thrown to the winds, and a wave of licentiousness and frivolity swept the country. Charles II and his followers who had enjoyed a gay life in France during their exile, did their best to introduce that type of foppery and looseness in England also. They renounced old ideals and demanded that English poetry and drama should follow the style to which they had become accustomed in the gaiety of Paris. Instead of having Shakespeare and the Elizabethans as their models, the poets and dramatists of the Restoration period began to imitate French writers and especially their vices.

The result was that the old Elizabethan spirit with its patriotism, its love of adventure and romance, its creative vigour, and the Puritan spirit with its moral discipline and love of liberty, became things of the past. For a time in poetry, drama and prose nothing was produced which could compare satisfactorily with the great achievements of the Elizabethans, of Milton, and even of minor writers of the Puritan age. But then the writers of the period began to evolve something that was characteristic of the times and they made two important contributions to English literature in the form of realism and a tendency to preciseness.

In the beginning realism took an ugly shape, because the writers painted the real pictures of the corrupt society and court. They were more concerned with vices rather than with virtues. The result was a coarse and inferior type of literature. Later this tendency to realism became more wholesome, and the writers tried to portray realistically human life as they found it—its good as well as bad side, its internal as well as external shape.

The tendency to preciseness which ultimately became the chief characteristic of the Restoration period, made a lasting contribution to English literature. It emphasised directness and simplicity of expression, and counteracted the tendency of exaggeration and extravagance which was encouraged during the Elizabethan and the Puritan ages. Instead of using grandiloquent phrases, involved sentences full of Latin quotations and classical allusions, the Restoration writers, under the influence of French writers, gave emphasis to reasoning rather than romantic fancy, and evolved an exact, precise way of writing, consisting of short, clear-cut sentences without any unnecessary word. The Royal Society, which was established during this period enjoined on all its members to use ‘a close, naked, natural way of speaking and writing, as near the mathematical plainness as they can’. Dryden accepted this rule for his prose, and for his poetry adopted the easiest type of verse-form—the heroic couplet. Under his guidance, the English writers evolved a style—precise, formal and elegant—which is called the classical style, and which dominated English literature for more than a century.

Neoclassicism into Romanticism

The Neoclassical period overlapped with the 18th century Age of Enlightenment and continued into the early 19th century. Neoclassicism was viewed as a revolutionary denial of the self-indulgence of the baroque. Neoclassicism's formal stylistic characteristics had a tendency to copy ancient Greco-Roman art with a prominence on poise, self-control, and grandeur of scale. The period was searching to modify society by procuring ancient virtue, morality, and ethics as solutions to what society felt to be the playfulness, recklessness, and lavishness of 18th century privileged.

In this Period, people believed that natural passions aren't necessarily good; natural passions must be subordinated to social needs and be strictly controlled. Authors believed that reason was the primary basis of authority. They believed that social needs are more important than individual needs.

There are some characteristics of poetry in this period. More importance was given to diction, focusing on vocabulary and grammar. Often, The form is formal, and the meter and rhyme scheme are regular. The subjects include manners, politics, social concerns. The language is formal, full of allusions and didactic. poets gave importance to poetic 'eye' where the reader sees the other person through the poet's eye.

On the other hand, Romanticism materialized in conflict with the 18th century Age of Enlightenment as an international movement shaping all the arts. It began at least in the 1770's and passed on into the second half of the nineteenth century. It arose in Western Europe on the heels of the French [Revolution](#) as countries started to become more industrialized, which drastically changed how people lived.

[Romanticism](#) was largely a response to the previous ideas of the Enlightenment, which focused on order and logic. An emphasis on imagination, emotion and intuition over rational thought are all characteristic of the writing of the time.

the Romantics asserted that reliance on emotion and natural passions provided a valid and powerful means of knowing and a reliable guide to ethics and living.

In Romantic literature, Imagination and emotion are more important than reason and formal rules; imagination is a gateway to transcendent experience

and truth. intuition and a reliance on “natural” feelings as a guide to conduct are valued over controlled, rationality .

Writers, in this period, focused less on realistic limits and let their imaginations rule plots and characters without restraint, often highlighting emotions.

Various forms of lyrics were especially popular, as were problem, sentimental and historical novels. Gothic and metrical romances were successful, and many people enjoyed ancient myths and ballads. Critical essays allowed people of this time to point out what they thought was problematic with the ideas and practices of Enlightenment, strengthening and spreading Romantic beliefs.

There are some characteristics of poetry in this period. Less importance was given to diction and more to the language of common man. The form is less formal. It may have irregular meter and rhyme . The subjects include Humankind, nature, the soul, women and common people. They gave importance to poetic 'I', meaning the reader sees the poet in the protagonist.

Here, we have to refer to William Blake whose work stands alone in the literature. He is one of the founders of the romantic period. He led a difficult life. He was a poet and a painter of a genius wholly individual. If he is to be believed, he saw strange things and figures gathering around him in the garden as a group of friends. These visions loosened him from the material world. Blake liberated the human soul from its slavery to matter. Much of his thought seems to have sprung fully formed out of his own intuitions, though his reading was wider than is often imagined, and the influence of some mystics, is strong upon his work.

As a prophet, and a liberator of the human spirit, Blake is of first importance, but as an artist he is limited by his arbitrary methods, and by an absence of discipline. In his later Prophetic Books, Blake is in the danger of disregarding tradition completely. He uses a symbolism of his own invention, a secret language, bewildering to the reader, and destructive of the unity of his poems as works of art.

As a poet Blake is at his best in his simplest poems, "songs of innocence" and "experience", where wisdom speaks with the voice of a child. As a painter his art has a brilliance of imagination which is compelling and often leads the observer to total surrender.